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ABSTRACT

The type of reading teacher needed to teach reading at all grade levels in urban schools is characterized, and the habits and attitudes necessary for success are identified. The teacher needs to be (1) cognizant of the attitudes, misunderstandings, and prejudices of his colleagues; (2) aware of the possible hostility of his students, but sensitive to their personal and group needs; (3) in possession of a multitude of skills not only in the subject matter but also in methodology; and (4) strongly committed to helping his students improve their reading. Because of the similar reading-disability syndrome at all grade levels in the urban school, the following general guidelines were recommended. (1) The reading teacher must know the life style of his students and respect and use it as an instructional base. (2) He should know the basic pedagogy for teaching reading while remaining openminded and experiment-minded. (3) Sympathy and empathy for the personal and group needs of the students are necessary. (4) He must be in attunement with the present needs and future aspirations of the community. (CL)

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MEETING READING PROBLEMS IN
URBAN SCHOOLS

"Teaching Reading to the Inner-City Child"
Thursday May 7, 1970
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"He who would slay dragons must first know their habits." But he who would cope successfully with the reading problems of students in urban schools must first know his own habits, as well as those of his students. It is the purpose of this paper, therefore, to focus on those habits and attitudes which the urban reading teacher needs to cultivate. To complete the analogy, this paper concerns itself with two inter-related aspects of teaching reading: the first with those whom the reading teacher would rescue from the dragon of reading disability; and the second with those who are the strategists on the battlefields.

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That this concern is focused in the proper direction can best be deduced from the fact that U.S. Commissioner of Education, James E. Allen, at the inception of the new year issued a call for a national drive for reading improvement in the 1970's. This call comes despite the fervid and frenetic activity during the 1950's and 1960's to upgrade reading instruction.

Such activity has embraced either alternately or concomitantly the "Why-Johnny-Can't Read" and phonics vs. the look-say controversies, experience charts, Fernald methodology, Initial Teaching Alphabet, Color cues, Words-in-Color, programmed textbooks, eye cameras, reading slides, films and filmstrips, SRA reading laboratories, individualized vs. basal texts reading programs, SQ3R and other formulas, NDEA reading-teacher training institutes, tachistoscopic training, listening posts, perceptual development studies, talking typewriters, reading-task forces, tutorial programs, compensatory education plans, in-service training, and presently even culturally-valid basal readers and trade books. Much "hue and cry" has accompanied each new study, each new method, each new panel of experts, each new piece of hardware and each new text. Yet after sixteen years--the span of International Reading Association's existence--there is a forty percent (40%) high-school dropout rate for black inner-city students and a seventy percent (70%) reading retardation rate for those black youth who do remain and complete high school. (To say nothing of the percentages

for other disadvantaged groups.) Obviously something is wrong!

Public Reaction

Columnist Carl T. Rowan on December 7, 1969, in a nationally syndicated column (The Plain Dealer, Cleveland, Ohio) drew an ominous picture of the plight of this country's urban schools. He stated:

The public schools of America's cities are in a mess. And growing worse. They are populated by children who do not or will not learn and burdened by the teachers who cannot or will not teach. They are plagued by racial and ethnic hostilities and by violence flowing out of an assortment of emotions. Some schools in our greatest cities are graduating classes in which three diploma holders out of four cannot truly read or write and are utterly unprepared to go on to higher education, or to cope with the problems of earning a living.

Obviously new directions must be sought!

Although it is axiomatic that knights should map out their winning campaigns, and planners of viable urban reading programs should do the same by becoming thoroughly familiar with the "lay of the land," it is not within the province of this paper to deal with the smoke and flames of the socio-economic-political reports which are belched forth steadily each day by communications media. It should be sufficient to say that for this nation, Armageddon may be the next campaign. The plethora of sociological tracts and learned statistical reports which describe the physical and emotional climate of today's city pin-point the teaching problems that middle-class, wasp-oriented instructors face--whatever their

race. These reports indicate, also, to the discerning teacher that preliminary skirmishes are already under way in urban settings.

Educational Climate

By connotation the term "urban school" is synonymous with "inner-city" school and conjures up a vivid image of an antiquated physical plant, overcrowded, with a basically non-white student population who is both intellectually and financially impoverished. (The jargon is "disadvantaged" or "culturally deprived.") Accompanying this idea is the horrendous vision that within the school walls, one finds wild scenes of mayhem--unruly classroom behavior, violent language, drugs, robberies, beatings, assaults, rapes, and even murders. As a result of these criminal occurrences, there is much unrest resulting in student confrontations, parental demonstrations, and striking teachers.

In the immediate environment outside the school, one visualizes hunger and deprivation in the community, rat and roach infested, overpeopled, dilapidated housing, bloody scenes of police shoot-ins and shoot-outs, accelerating crime rates, spontaneous riots and blatant militant demands for community control of schools. The picture--more often than not--is for real! And it is with this reality that the urban reading teacher must cope. Again, it should be sufficient to say that any holier-than-thou, missionary-type teacher who ventures into a large city school to teach reading--or any other subject for that matter--without having first armoured himself in the sociology

of that school and its environs will end up as frustrated and ineffective as Don Quixote in his battles with windmills.

Disabled Reader Syndrome

Moreover, it matters not whether the reading teacher is in grade school, secondary school, adult education, dropout programs or remedial courses in the two-year college. The same identifiable disabled reader syndrome appears. This syndrome reveals itself to a greater or lesser extent according to the individual. However, its general features can be discerned by any sensitive teacher. In short, the observer will find poor readers who manifest attitudes of negative self-concepts and low esteem for their individual and group abilities. These students will exhibit passive despair and quiet hopelessness or aggressive, angry unconcern in reading situations. Their mannerisms will show signs of nervousness and anxiety. Their individual and/or collective behavior may be overtly hostile. An aura of fearfulness will enshroud those who still have varying degrees of hope left. But all these poor readers--whatever their rank, whatever their behavior, and whatever their verbalization--scream in quiet desperation: "I am hopeless. I want to read well whatever I desire to read!"

Of course, while attitudes cannot be measured accurately, and the reading teacher must sense them, he should be able to diagnose objectively that these retarded readers are deficient in a multiplicity of reading skills: conceptualizing, interpreting, analyzing, word attack, comprehension, rate adjustment and vocabulary power, as well

as deficient in the other communication skills of speaking, writing, and listening, i.e., standard usage in language power. However, the ability to read well is of paramount importance, not only to the readers themselves, but also to their parents and the members of the larger community.

Therapy

Like the disability syndrome a workable therapeutic approach for reading remediation at all grade levels appears. It, too, seems to manifest similar characteristics for reading success irrespective of the readers' ages. To get to the 'nitty gritty' of this approach for the improvement of reading instruction in ghetto-ized American city schools, reading teachers should be aware that there are generally recognizable conditions the successful teacher must meet. These conditions are the same which any good teacher meets to ensure the success of learning objectives at even the most prestigious upper-class private schools. Namely, the teacher needs to:

1. Know the subject matter thoroughly
2. Possess skill in the latest methodology
3. Be familiar with the intellectual and physical background of the students
4. Use a wide variety of relevant instructional materials and resources
5. Be accessible and responsive to the parents
6. Be enthusiastic and able to arouse enthusiasm for learning
7. Be warm and flexible, relating both humanly and humanely to meet the individual and group needs of students

But there are broader dimensions to coping with urban students'

reading problems, dimensions which go far beyond the usual psychological concepts expounded in the typical "silent-majority-based, how-to-do-it" methods courses. The specialist who resolves meaningfully most of the learning problems of his disadvantaged students is of a special breed. It has been stated earlier that he is an expert in the sociology of his school and its community --and is knowledgeable of the peculiar socio-economic political data pertinent to his particular teaching situation. This ideal reading teacher, further, is a master instructor well abreast of his pedagogic homework. For it is a fact, that the onus of today's chaotic public educational climate is due in great part to the tradition-bound, conservative, and ill-prepared teacher who neither understands what he should teach, how it should be taught, nor whom he teaches!!

The Ideal Reading Teacher

To explicate, in addition to the gifts of social and pedagogical omniscience, the successful reading teacher has other attributes. One characteristic is that he is thick-skinned and immune to the possible enmity of his colleagues. For if they are typical, they will evince the same middle-class attitudes, misunderstandings and prejudices as the larger dominant community does toward poor non-white readers. Also if the reading teacher is experiment-minded and multi-talented--which he ought to be, if the reading teacher is creative and indefatigable--which he should be; if

the reading teacher is sensitive to the present needs and future aspirations of his disabled students--which he must be; then that teacher also must be cognizant that he may incur the resentment of his less involved co-workers--unless he is a master politician. With the single-minded aim to improve the reading capabilities of his students, the teacher invariably "steps on toes" as he goes to battle for personal lesson planning time, community-resources involvement, laboratory assistance, individual student time, more space, the latest reading materials, and human dignity for "those people" whom he teaches. In essence, when the administration is conservative, the dedicated reading teacher still tries to "do his own thing." He forgets an administrative fight. However, when the administration is favorable, the teacher is even "more together," but he does not forget his colleagues. The ideal situation, of course, is one wherein both administration and staff are emotionally geared and materially enabled to ameliorate the entire range of learning problems evidenced by the students. Such utopias are seldom found in today's city schools, however.

Still another personality attribute that the teacher of reading needs is that of being impervious to the hostility, open or latent, of his students. At the same time he manifests a monolithic dedication to his students' welfare, he is sympathetic to their personal and group needs. Intellectually the urban reading teacher recognizes that the institutionalized racism inherent in

the American educational system has perpetuated a mythopoeic philosophy and curriculum that has served to "enwhiten" two generations of black people.

It is the rejection by today's militant black youth of this educational stance which has set the stage for urban school battles. It is this awareness by black students and black parents of the instructional failures of educational institutions which has caused the cry for community control of schools. And it is the disillusionment for most black people with the reality of the American nightmare that has ignited flames across urban skies. The perceptive teacher, thereby, in urban schools knows that the discontent is contagious--causing infection in other alienated ethnic and poor white minority groups, and/or causing polarization along ethnocentric lines.

Consequently, the reading teacher who would be successful at any grade level has another important attribute to his make-up. He deems it important--in addition to the proper attitude, pedagogical preparation, and sociological consciousness--that he be familiar with the ethos of the students with whom he interacts. He knows that he must operate within a carefully constructed framework built upon respect for and knowledge of the history, culture, cultural contributions, and present life-styles of the students, their families, and their ethnic group within the larger community. He is aware that despite all his other talents, his

ability to sympathize and empathize with the physical and psychic needs of his inner-city students will influence their learning success. In the final analysis, it will be the reading teacher's demonstration of all the previously mentioned attitudes plus his ability to utilize black literary models, black folkways/lifestyles, and black linguistic idioms as sources for instructional materials and inspiration that will determine instructional success. It will be, too, the reading teacher's exploitation of the resources of the larger community and his capacity to make his teaching relevant to the needs of this community which will sustain success.

If teachers of reading would deal meaningfully with problems in urban schools, then they must believe as does Dr. Richard Worthen, who in a recent address to the College section at N.C.T.E.'s Annual Convention (November 29, 1969, Washington, D.C.) stated:

"Every student, regardless of any other consideration, is driven to seek intellectual encounter and is worthy of being taught to cope with symbols successfully...Teachers must recognize that literature must be used in all ways that are relevant to the students and that the needs of the students must be paramount, rather than the predilections of the instructor."

In 1968 Sister Aretha Franklin sang a best seller on the Soul Hit-Parade entitled "Respect." Although she is singing to her lover, there is one significant line which every reading teacher in urban schools needs to heed. It goes:

"R - E - S - P - E - C - T
Find out what it means to me"

The refrain is: "All I want is a little bit of respect." This

is what the revolution in urban schools is about in part:

"R - E - S - P - E - C - T" and what it means not only to black students, but also to Chicanos, Native-Americans, Eskimos, Appalachians, Puerto Ricans, Portuguese, Hawaiians, or whoever.

To conclude, the urban teacher who hopes to meet the reading needs of his students must be an extraordinary instructor. He realizes that one of his biggest tasks is to get out of the "narrow Anglo ethnocentric bag of middle-class America." He must rethink and revise methods and objectives even at the expense of hostility possibly from his administrators, co-workers or students. He is willing to utilize cultural data and to use his imagination, creativity, and ingenuity to make the reading classroom the relevant and exciting place of learning it can be. If he needs help to ease his conscience at being caught between the dilemma of serving either the dominant culture or meeting the special needs of his students, he remembers that relevant education is this country's best means for keeping alive the goal of a viable democratic society. As Dr. Worthen said, "Barbarism threatens if communication becomes untenable." The reading teacher today in urban schools must be committed to keeping open the channels of communication--and in the rhetoric of the revolutionaries--"by any means necessary." For the reading teacher is the last hope before the academic-political barbarism or totalitarianism that threatens.

1. Aarons, Alfred C., Barbara T. Gordon and William A. Stewart ed. Linguistic-Cultural Differences and American Education. North Miami Beach, Florida: The Florida FI Reporter, Spring, Summer 1969.